

ARTICLE REPRODUCED
 CHANGE A-19

WASHINGTON POST
 2 October 1984

William McPherson

Which One Is the Wimp?

What rough beast, I ask myself, his hour come round at last, is even now slouching toward November waiting to be born again? We have known for some time that real men stand tall and pass up the quiche, that they've put away their neck chains (hard to wear a necklace when you're out chopping wood), and of course they slick their hair with water, in the manner of President Reagan. Any day now barber shops will be back, offering this time around images of John Wayne flickering on the video instead of well-thumbed copies of Police Gazette. The days of the hair designer are numbered. The wimp slumps round-shouldered and quivering, hopelessly in contempt. The Age of Aquarius that dawned so genially back there in the '60s, long of hair and empty of mind but with the best will in the world, has passed on, though perhaps not so far on as one might think.

Look, for instance, at the current presidential campaign in which wimpishness has become an issue, though rarely clearly stated. It is not an idea that's easy to state; in fact, it's not an idea at all but a feeling—a "concept"—and not a desirable one, either. No one wants to be seen as a jellyfish. Real men today stand firm, take it on the chin, and give as good as they get—sort of like John Wayne. Moreover, their voices never rise above a healthy, amiable baritone, and of course, with a real man, the buck stops there. All this is a matter of "image," not in the sense of likeness, which the word once commonly signified, but in the sense of impression. As everyone knows, impressions can be misleading.

To take just one, the polls reveal that Americans overwhelmingly view President Reagan as a strong and decisive leader. They "like" him, the way they "like" Pepsi and for the same reasons: success in packaging. The concept plays, and it plays especially well on television, a cool medium wonderfully suited to the selling of wishes, hopes and dreams. It's sold a lot of Pepsi, and it sells a lot of presidents.

The facts, however, as opposed to the impression, seem to me to be quite different. To take only the most recent examples, if military intelligence fails, it must be someone else's fault, either for-

mer President Carter's or, when that didn't quite work, the fault of the press (always a convenient scapegoat) for misinterpreting as usual. If the American Embassy in Beirut suffers another terrorist attack, it's not really the government's failure to provide security but, to take a homely image, somehow the fault of the contractor—you know, like having your kitchen remodeled: nothing ever gets done on schedule.

And, if President Reagan wants to talk to the Soviet Foreign Minister about arms control, surely the most important issue of our time, better not tell the Department of Defense. Well, he can tell Secretary Weinberger, but Weinberger's got to promise not to tell Richard N. Perle, his assistant secretary for international security policy. Perle might shoot the idea down. Unnamed "Pentagon officials," according to Lou Cannon's story in Sunday's Post, might "put out word that Reagan was not prepared to be conciliatory, and the Soviet diplomat would not come."

What's going on here? Is this the way a strong and decisive leader acts? Is a strong and decisive leader afraid of an assistant secretary in a Cabinet department? Is a strong and decisive leader reluctant to take responsibility when something doesn't go well, or, in the case of the embassy in Beirut, goes disastrously? Of course not. A strong and decisive leader speaks out and speaks straight. He says what the president is quoted by aides as saying privately to Gromyko last Friday: "We can't accomplish anything talking about each other. We have to talk to each other." Exactly.

Which brings us to the format of the presidential debates, or rather non-debates. Next Sunday night are the American people going to see their president and his opponent squaring off and speaking to one another, questioning one another, arguing with one another in the manner of Lincoln and Douglas or even Kennedy and Nixon? No. There will be no direct debate. A panel of journalists will question the candidates, who will then be allowed closing statements. The candidates themselves need never confront one another directly. They could be speaking from separate studios, in separate cities, for all of that. It's not

good enough that the critical issue of who is better prepared to lead us through the next four years should be decided in two 90-minute sessions of stand-up television and endless hours of political commercials that sell the candidates as if they were Pepsi competing with Coke. We're not talking about "visuals" here, and what makes us feel good. We're talking about the future and how it will play. And as Reagan said at the United Nations last week, "I believe that the future is far nearer than most of us would dare hope."

Personally, I'm afraid that that rough beast I mentioned as slouching toward November is the old wimp, just wearing new clothes—like the emperor.

The writer is a member of the editorial page staff.